

The Changing Roles of Women in Violent Islamist Groups

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Introduction

An increased focus on the participation of women in violent Islamism¹ has not ended misconceptions plaguing Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) policies² and questions remain about the threat posed by women associated with violent Islamist groups.³ Ill-informed perceptions of women's contributions to these movements can have serious ramifications, including deferential treatment in courts, insufficient intervention programming, and failure to disrupt the next wave of women involved in violent-Islamist inspired activity. While it is important to understand the motivations of women participating in violent Islamist movements, it is also critical to recognize the ideology of the organizations they join. A better comprehension of this phenomenon helps policymakers and practitioners anticipate new and evolving threats concerning women in violent extremism.

Conventionally speaking, Islamism seeks to create a political order defined by Islam, specifically in the form of a Sharia-based state.⁴ While institutional Islamists strive to create a Sharia-based state through the existing political system, violent Islamists attempt to create such a state by any means necessary, including acts of violence.⁵ While all violent Islamist groups desire a society ruled by Sharia law, they differ significantly over the interpretation and implementation of Sharia law as well as what constitutes appropriate uses of violence. Strategic and ideological differences exist between global jihadi groups like the Islamic State and other violent Islamist groups such as Hamas.⁶ For example, groups like Hamas believe in "revolution from below," which pushes for change by gathering support through *da'wa*⁷ and taking part in local politics. On the other hand, global jihadi groups like the Islamic State seek "change from above" while breaking – or even destroying – the political status quo.⁸

Focusing on the strategic logic and communication tools used by violent Islamists allows for an understanding of the tactics different groups use to recruit both men and women. While some preliminary research on authoritarian institutions suggests that an entity's relationship with women can be an indicator of stability and the future success of the group, more scholarship is necessary to understand if such dynamics manifest in violent extremist groups.⁹ Perhaps studying the evolution of an organization's relationship with women, and the group's gendered narratives, can help to highlight the direction of the organization and its future success.

This paper seeks to forecast the potential threat from women by looking at different violent Islamist groups and examining their rhetorical shifts concerning women's roles in combat. In order to do

this, this paper will first look at the historical relationship between violent Islamist ideology and women. Next, this paper will look at Hamas and the Islamic State as case studies, both before and after they became governing actors, to showcase that across groups of Islamist persuasion, women's roles tend to be dynamic and shaped by a range of factors. Finally, this paper will show that when violent Islamist groups break from convention, they open the doors to female participation in violence.

Violent Islamist Ideology and Women

In violent Islamist ideology, traditional gender roles are central, with women encouraged to remain in the private sphere, the home, or in supporting roles. These groups do not see themselves as trivializing women's roles; rather, they emphasize the importance of returning to and upholding conventional women's roles in the family, support network, and as educators of the next generation.¹⁰

Violent Islamist groups have consistently struggled with determining the appropriate role for women within their ranks. Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood member, and one of the chief ideologues of early al-Qaeda, Abdullah Azzam, opened the doors to debates on women and jihad. In his book, *Defense of the Muslim Lands*, Azzam argued that defensive jihad was an individual duty for all Muslims when Muslim lands were under attack¹¹; under these conditions, Azzam suggested that a wife could participate "without the permission of her husband."¹² Later, in his 1987 book *Join the Caravan*, Azzam reiterated women's duty to carry out defensive jihad, but stipulated that "Arab women may not come without a non-marriageable male guardian (*mahram*). Their duties are confined to education, nursing, and assisting refugees. As for fighting, Arab women may not fight because until now, Afghan women are not participating in the fighting."¹³ While open to having women play a greater role in public life, Azzam was unwilling to give women explicit permission to fight.

Sayyed Imam Al-Sharif, also known as 'Abd al-Qadir bin 'Abd al-'Aziz and Dr. Fadl, was a former mentor to al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. Al-Sharif reiterated women's duty to carry out defensive jihad, but added: "[f]or this reason, women can receive basic training so they can be prepared to repel their attackers."¹⁴ Yusuf al-'Ayyiri, an ideological leader of al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia¹⁵ killed in 2003, took this a step further in *The Role of Women in the Jihad against Enemies*, where he wrote about contemporary women fighters and also emphasized that jihad was defensive and a personal duty in the current time, giving women permission to carry out jihad.¹⁶

While ideologues of violent Islamism were not actively encouraging women to participate in jihad, it is interesting to note that they were also unwilling to condemn the women who did engage in violence.¹⁷ For example, after the June 2000 attack by the first female suicide bomber in Chechnya, Hawa Barayev, Yusuf al-'Ayyiri issued a *fatwa* titled *Islamic Ruling on the Permissibility of Self Sacrifice (Martyrdom) Operations*.¹⁸ Though calling her "the great Mujāhidah, Hawwā' Barayev," the document ruminated on the permissibility of martyrdom operations in general but did not focus on women and jihad. Another example of this mixed-signaling was Ayman al-Zawahiri's speech in November 2010, titled "*Who Will Support Scientist Aafia Siddiqui?*"¹⁹ Coinciding with the trial of Aafia Siddiqui, a woman convicted of attempting to kill U.S. employees in Afghanistan, Zawahiri's speech praised Siddiqui's actions but did not call for other women to follow her lead.

Groups like Hamas and the Islamic State have tried to reconcile the differences between their radical Islamist ideology and the practical role that women play in their organizations. While both groups have Islamist roots, the divide between national-Islamist groups like Hamas, and global jihadi groups like the Islamic State, remains vast. Nevertheless, each of these groups has broken from convention and encouraged women to take up arms, at least rhetorically, but only under specific circumstances and for limited periods of time.

Hamas

Hamas emerged as a wing of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Palestinian arena in 1987, seeking to fight not only against Israel, but against non-Islamist forms of governance. While Hamas saw women's roles as being limited to the private sphere, several key events, including ongoing struggles with Israel and other Palestinian groups, created policy changes on women's involvement in jihad and resistance.

In Hamas' 1988 charter, articles 17 and 18 state that women are vital to the dissemination of their ideology. After calling Muslim women the "maker of men," the charter notes that women play "the most important role in looking after the family, rearing the children and imbuing them with moral values and thoughts derived from Islam."²⁰

From 1993 and 2000, increased counter-measures by Israeli forces made it so 30 percent of Palestinian male suicide bombers were caught before carrying out their attacks.²¹ Due to the perception of women as less violent, Palestinian women were able to have greater freedom of movement and access to potential targets. In this climate, Palestinian groups, including Hamas, were aware of women's strategic and operational advantages and leveraged women as a way to circumvent detection and carry out attacks.

In the 2000s, Hamas' initial stance towards women as solely wives and mothers began to shift. In 2001, Ahlam Mazen Al-Tamimi was arrested for her supporting role in the bombing of a Sbarro restaurant in Jerusalem.²² On Hamas' own Al-Qassam website, the organization praised Al-Tamimi and called her "the first female member in Al Qassam Brigades, the military wing of Hamas."²³

In January 2002, Wafa Idris became the first Palestinian female suicide bomber in Israel, carrying out an attack for Fatah, Hamas' main rival. While acknowledging women's practical roles in violence, Hamas continued to refuse to allow female suicide bombers but also suggested that there was room for future female participation. As an example of this position, Sheikh Yassin, a spiritual leader of Hamas, argued:

*At the present stage, we do not need women to bear this burden of jihad and martyrdom...meanwhile, women have no military organization in the framework of the [Islamic] movement. When such an organization arises, it will be possible to discuss wide-scale recruitment of women.*²⁴

In February 2002, Darin Abu Aisheh became the second Palestinian female suicide bomber, conducting an operation for Fatah. However, she initially sought to carry out the attack in the name of Hamas, before the organization told Aisheh, “your duty is not [to] be a suicide bomber, your duty is to take care of children.”²⁵

In March 2003, Yusuf al Qaradawi, Dean of Islamic Studies at the University of Qatar, noted women’s strategic advantage in carrying out attacks and reiterated Azzam’s argument that defensive jihad was incumbent on all, men and women.²⁶ Hamas took this ruling very seriously, and Qaradawi’s *fatwa* regarding jihad as an obligation for all was still cited on the Hamas’ Al-Qassam website as recently as 25 June 2018.²⁷

Three key factors forced Hamas to re-evaluate its policy regarding female suicide bombers. First, increased strategic restraints on men (such as age restrictions upon entering Jerusalem). Second, successful female suicide attacks by both Fatah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Third, outside religious justifications such as those by Qaradawi.

In 2004, Reem Riyashi became Hamas’ first female suicide bomber.²⁸ While Hamas claimed the attack and praised Riyashi, the group also continued to emphasize that its use of women was only a strategic necessity. In 2005, Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zurhi said: “The Palestinian resistance, at times, purposely uses women in some operations that men cannot carry out, especially in high-security areas, which male Palestinian Mujahideen cannot easily reach. This is why the Palestinian woman has an important role in the Palestinian resistance, and at times she may even have roles that the young male Palestinian Mujahed cannot fulfill.”²⁹ In this context, Hamas did not encourage women to take up arms or carry out attacks unilaterally, but rather, condoned women’s participation in only limited circumstances.

In January 2006, under the “Change and Reform” block, Hamas won a majority of the seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council, outmaneuvering its biggest electoral rival, Fatah. In June 2007, relations broke down, and Hamas has since been the de-facto ruler of the Gaza Strip. Between 2002 and 2006, there were nine Palestinian female suicide bombers, two which carried out attacks for Hamas. Hamas’ assumption of electoral power was accompanied by a drop in female suicide attacks, with the last female suicide bomber carrying out her attack in 2006, just months after Hamas won power.³⁰

A new wave of violence in the Palestinian arena occurred between 2015 and 2016 mostly consisting of low-intensity stabbing and shooting attacks.³¹ This period was marked by higher rates of female participation, with women carrying out 27 of the 170 attacks (or 15.8 percent).³² During this period, Hamas released several statements across their social media platforms articulating the organization’s support for women who conducted violence.³³ While Hamas spoke encouragingly of the women who took up arms, the group itself did not seem to be organizing these women.

Recently, in May 2017, Hamas updated its charter, noting that “[t]he role of Palestinian women is fundamental in the process of building the present and the future, just as it has always been in the process of making Palestinian history. It is a pivotal role in the project of resistance, liberation and building the political system.”³⁴ While not clarifying if resistance is ideological or physical,

Hamas' new charter clearly encourages women to assume a more active role in public life and politics.

Islamic State

The Islamic State, which declared its so-called Caliphate in 2014, emerged out of the ashes of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Crucially, the Islamic State differed from its predecessor AQI over the use of female suicide bombers; AQI regularly used female suicide bombers and combatants in their operations. However, the connections between AQI and the Islamic State cannot be underestimated because, despite its numerous name changes, the organization at its core remains the same.³⁵ It is therefore necessary to go back and look at AQI and the practical experiences that led to the Islamic State's rhetorical evolution on women in combat.³⁶

In early 2004, AQI leader Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi released a message titled "*Follow the Caravan*," where he stated: "The war has broken out and the caller to Jihad has called for it, and the doors of the heavens have opened, if you don't want to be [one] of the knights, then make room for the women to commence, and take the eyeliner O you women with turbans and beards, if not then to the horses and here are the reins and shackles."³⁷ Although this was not an unbridled call for women to participate in jihad, Zarqawi was reminding his followers that defensive jihad is incumbent on all to fight, which was especially pertinent considering the influx of foreign military forces accompanying the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Months before AQI's first female bomber conducted an attack, Zarqawi released another message titled, "*Will the Religion Wane While I Live*" (2005).³⁸ He unambiguously discussed the role of women in jihad, referring to the precedent set by Umm Amarah, a female companion of the Prophet Muhammad and noted that there are "many mujahidah sisters in the Land of the Two Rivers [Iraq] who are requesting to perpetrate martyrdom-seeking operations." In this announcement, Zarqawi foreshadowed AQI's systematic use of female suicide bombers.

In April 2007, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, a successor of Zarqawi,³⁹ released a statement titled "*The Harvest of the Years in the Land of the Monotheists*."⁴⁰ Highlighting violent Islamist groups reluctance to give women unchecked permission to carry out acts of jihad, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi said, "[e]ven Iraqi women were pleading for martyrdom operations, but we forbade them from what men can do unless it is in special circumstances where men are unable to. Oh, what anguish, for those whom [sic] were less brave than women."⁴¹ This speech pinpoints the struggle faced by violent Islamic groups over the use of women in combat roles by both shaming men into action and allowing for women's participation under 'special circumstances.'

The surge of female suicide bombers peaked in 2008, partially due to operational pressures on the group, including coalition forces.⁴² At the turn of the decade, however, the organization seemingly stopped using female suicide bombers. Although the organization did not formally state that women were not supposed to engage in violence, it seemed as though the operational necessity that led to their involvement began to dissipate with the slow withdrawal of U.S. military troops. In other words, women's participation in suicide attacks were, in all appearances, a pragmatic decision, and the organization's ideological stance could conform accordingly.

In June 2014, at the height of its power, the Islamic State declared its so-called Caliphate. Unlike its predecessor AQI, the Islamic State framed its jihad as offensive, not defensive, and used its magazines Dabiq, and later Rumiyah, to consistently encourage women to return to conventional roles and be wives, mothers, and educators. In Dabiq issue 7, there was even a dedicated section in the magazine titled “to our sisters,” which encouraged women to “[b]e a base of support and safety for your husbands, brothers, fathers, and sons.”⁴³

August 2014 also heralded the start of the military offensive against the Islamic State by coalition forces. In early 2015, an organization alleging to be the media wing of ISIS’s all-female al-Khansa Brigade released a manifesto articulating the ideal role of women in the Caliphate, as first and foremost wives, mothers, and homemakers. However, the manifesto also acknowledged several exceptions, including allowing women to provide medical care or teach. It even stated that under very specific circumstances, there were cases where women could participate in combat, “if the enemy is attacking her country, the men are not enough to protect it, and the ulama have given a fatwa for it.”⁴⁴ The document provided the legal authority for women to commit violence within the framework of defensive jihad, while noting that those conditions were not yet met.

Between 2015 to 2016, the Islamic State continued to release several documents which began to tease out women’s roles in combat, while simultaneously emphasizing that women were only allowed to participate in jihad under very particular, defensive circumstances. The group reiterated these points in Dabiq issue 11 (2015) and Dabiq issue 15 (2016),⁴⁵ as well as by the Zawra’ Foundation, a female-focused pro-IS media agency, in 2015.⁴⁶ In December 2016, the Islamic State’s Arabic-language newspaper, al-Naba, argued that “jihad is not, as a rule, an obligation for women, but let the female Muslim know as well that if the enemy enters her abode, jihad is just as necessary for her as it is for the man, and she should repel him by whatever means possible.”⁴⁷ The Islamic State continued to echo the teachings of Azzam and Zawahiri, that women can only participate in combat in defensive actions.

While not actively encouraging women to participate in combat, the Islamic State has praised or spoken ambivalently about women who carried out operations. Specifically, this trend speaks mostly to women who operated beyond the organization’s territory and control. In February 2015 Sajida al-Rishawi, a failed AQI suicide bomber who was arrested in Jordan in 2005, was praised by the Islamic State, who demanded her release from a Jordanian prison in exchange for the lives of two hostages.⁴⁸ After the 2015 San Bernardino attack, the Islamic State, while praising the attack and actions of Tashfeen Malik to join her husband and leave behind a child for the sake of jihad, refrained from referring to her as one of its “soldiers.”⁴⁹ And finally, in 2016 when three young women attacked a police station in Kenya, its celebration was only tentative, noting these women “shoulder[ed] a duty that Allah had placed on the shoulders of the men of the Ummah.”⁵⁰ Despite not wanting women to actively take up arms, the Islamic State did not condemn these women for their actions. This contradiction highlights the Islamic State’s uneasy relationship with women and combat.

In 2017, the Islamic State began to incur significant territorial losses, including losing Mosul to the Iraqi government in July 2017. These losses shifted the Islamic State from the offensive to the defensive. In response to these new realities, the Islamic State has seemingly made a point to change its rhetoric, as evidenced in an article published in Rumiyah 11 (2017), entitled “Our

Journey to Allah.” While it touched on women’s roles as supporters, wives, and mothers, the article then veered off, calling women to

[r]ise with courage and sacrifice in this war as the righteous women did at the time of the Messenger of Allah, not because of the small number of men but rather, due to their love for jihad, their desire to sacrifice for the sake of Allah, and their desire for Jannah. Among those blessed women were Umm Amarah Nasibah Bint Kab al-Ansariyyah.⁵¹

The reference to Umm Amarah signaled a return to AQI’s call for women to take up arms and carry out suicide attacks back in 2005. An al-Naba (2017) article titled “The obligation on women to engage in jihad against the enemies” supported this point.⁵² Using examples of women from the time of the Prophet Mohammed, it called for female supporters of the Islamic State to follow their example. The commentary in al-Naba was supported by further articles in the publication encouraging women to follow in the footsteps of those before them who took up arms.⁵³

Finally, in February 2018, the Islamic State released an English-language video titled “Inside the Caliphate 7,” purportedly showing women, covered from head to toe, shooting guns and preparing for battle.⁵⁴ Although interpretations vary, including discussions about whether the figures in the video are actually women, this footage seemingly legitimizes women’s ability to take up arms in the conflict while maintaining their modesty under the pretext of defensive jihad. While the Islamic State has given the impression of a change, it appears largely rhetorical.

The Threat and Conclusions

Throughout their respective evolutions, both Hamas and the Islamic State continue to emphasize women’s traditional roles as wives and mothers. Though very different organizations with dissimilar strategies, both groups have struggled in their relationship with women and jihad. Under the guise of defensive jihad and strategic necessity, however, both groups demonstrate a willingness to incorporate women in jihad in select circumstances. As such, policymakers and practitioners might work to anticipate evolving threats in the future, as both organizations will likely employ women in more violent roles if the outlined conditions are met.

Hamas and the Islamic State’s rhetorical evolution on women’s roles in combat offers a deeper understanding of how other violent Islamist groups might change and adapt to shifting landscapes. While Hamas has evolved into a more stable political actor seeking to incorporate women into political roles, the Islamic State has lost its territory and has seemingly begun to call women to arms. These groups have a complex relationship with women and their positions within the organizations, and they have tried to reconcile the differences that lie between radical Islamist ideology and the practical role that women play in the organizations. This relationship will not remain static and will evolve as organizations continue to face different strategic threats.

As can be seen in both cases, the interplay between competing violent Islamist groups is also important for counter-terrorism officials to consider, as the actions and religious edicts of one group can influence the actions of other organizations and individuals. There also remains a risk from women who are inspired by the ideology of these groups, but who act outside of an organization’s command and control, as their actions are less predictable when compared to

women operating under organizational control. This is due to the violent Islamist ideology that encourages women to be in the private sphere, as well as strict gender roles which govern aspects of daily life under the control of groups like Hamas and the Islamic State. The Palestinian case has seen women carry out low impact or stabbing attacks, outside of Hamas' control. The Islamic State case has seen women inspired by the goals of the Islamic State seeking to carry out attacks in North America and Western Europe.

The threat remains that due to the deeply gendered ideology of these groups, policymakers and analysts could see more all-female cells,⁵⁵ as well as more family and relationship-based networks.⁵⁶ Scholars and practitioners will expect to see both Hamas and the Islamic State continue to praise attacks carried out by women when they align with their goals. It is crucial to question the impact these trends will have on other women around the world who are sympathetic to violent Islamist groups.

Independent of women's participation in combat, violent Islamist groups will certainly continue to use women in non-combat and in support roles. Women are financiers, recruiters, the carriers of the ideology to future generations, and in some cases, even combatants. Women play a vital role in the continuation of the ideology and are critical to the survival of violent Islamist groups.

Future research should continue to track the evolving rhetoric of violent Islamist groups, seeking to pinpoint when conditions are ripe for female participation in violence. Furthermore, despite the international focus on global jihadi groups, research should continue to look comparatively at other cases, seeking to find lessons learned. As policy makers and practitioners continue to create CVE policies, they must take into consideration that misconceptions regarding women's contributions to these movements can have serious ramifications and that, even when not mobilized as combatants, the threat women pose should not be underestimated.

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